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AUTHOR Norris, Martha A.
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ABSTRACT

The multi-faceted role of the advisor in an open education setting is defined in this paper. Background information on the development of the open corridor approach to elementary education (created in America by Lillian Weber), the subsequent emergence of the teacher support position of advisor and the resulting advisor training program is provided. The advisor has a variety of duties in her role as a non-partisan, non-threatening aide to participating teachers, in which she must develop a relationship with teachers which encourages their learning and development within the open corridor model. In this capacity, the advisor: (1) assists with planning, scheduling, and room arrangement; (2) leads weekly discussion groups with teachers on curriculum, organization, and children; (3) helps teachers observe and evaluate individual children; (4) maintains a liaison between teachers and the administrative staff, and between specialists and teachers; and (5) interprets the program to parents and suggests ways in which parents can participate. (ED)

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THE ROLE OF THE ADVISOR IN OPEN EDUCATION SETTINGS

by

MARTHA A. NORRIS

In 1967 when Lillian Weber created what we know today as the Open Corridor in P.S. 123 Manhattan, the first ever in an American public school, she set into motion a wave of change in the direction of humanistic education for *all* children. The structure for this change was built slowly and carefully, in order to establish a new and solid basis for organization, curriculum, setting, and atmosphere in school learning.

As a supervisor of City College student teachers in their classroom placements in public schools, Professor Weber had discovered that a more dynamic and vital classroom experience, significantly different from the traditional schoolrooms, was needed to provide essential training for future teachers of children in the lower grades. The ideas and inspiration for a suitable vehicle to train student teachers flowed from her observations of the informal schools in England, which she had studied for a year and a half in 1965 and 1966. (She was at this point already at work refining her experience in the book ENGLISH INFANT SCHOOL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION.) Confronted with a typical public elementary school, she searched for those elements of the English school's structure and function that could be useful for application in New York. She was well aware that an approach used in English schools could not be transplanted in New York City, for implementation of an informal approach was officially sanctioned in England, whereas the incorporation of informal methods in New York City public school

settings was hardly a consideration by anyone. She did, however, extract possibilities:

--the possibility of utilizing the small school concept, of creating a school within a school. By taking over some segment of a school -- one corridor -- a community of classrooms could be set up in which teachers would open their classroom doors (literally) to other teachers, other children, and parents. The corridor would be the hub of the community where older and younger children could work together and learn from each other, where all could meet to sing, talk, and share their classroom activities, where the overflow of activities in the classroom could be accommodated, and where new projects could originate to be fed into curriculum in the classroom.

--the possibility for more social interaction between teacher and teacher, teacher and child, and child and child. Teachers could help each other, share resources and materials, exchange ideas, work together on problems, thus fostering cooperation rather than competition. The simple matter of greeting individual children -- taking a moment to chat with a concerned parent -- would be possible for teachers in a more flexible classroom setting.

--the possibility for a break with whole class teaching -- a departure from ability grouping within a class -- permitting fluidity in grouping and more individualized teaching. The teacher would continue to plan for her class and also plan for individual child's pattern and pace of learning. Children could be grouped for help with a particular skill -- acknowledging that one child will grasp a skill faster than another.

--the possibility for introducing concrete materials in primary classrooms. The changes in the classroom had a rationale in Professor

Weber's view of children's learning. Thinking proceeds from concrete to abstract and children need concrete experiences that will sharpen their perception and lead to conceptualization.

--the possibility for helping teachers reassess the relatedness of subject areas, on the assumption that young children do not think or learn in the discrete subject and time units used in the traditional classroom.

--the possibility for helping teachers present a concept on many different levels with varied materials. In this way children could be helped to internalize an idea when they have encountered it in many different contexts.

--the possibility of making classrooms and corridors attractive and comfortable.

--the possibility of helping teachers understand that the totality of the child's learning in first and second grades is not reading, though reading is an indispensable skill.

The basis for all these possibilities lay in organizing an environment that would reflect the following key aspects of informal or open education:

.Each child's pattern or style of learning is unique. His pace is individual.

.Young children learn from concrete firsthand experiences.

.The child is the active agent in his own learning. His curiosity and interest are potent factors in learning.

.Children can learn from each other if the educational environment is organized for this purpose. For example, heterogeneous grouping provides for interaction within a community of diverse individuals.

.The child's feelings of mastery and competence must be subscribed to and promoted.

From Lillian Weber's work in the first corridor, word spread, and teachers and parents in other schools became interested in this new approach. The philosophic base of the corridor concept was all this time in the process of becoming refined and crystallized. Its practical application and implementation, however, were proving viable in an elementary school setting. The new challenge soon became quite apparent: to create the means whereby the corridor concept could be introduced and established in other schools. What was now needed was a support system for teachers and other staff who were willing to undertake changes. The position of advisor emerged with an accompanying training program. New courses for teachers materialized at City College as did the Workshop Center for Open Education and a Master's Program in Individualized Curriculum.

The advisor's role was the first component of this developing support system -- and the most vital -- since the advisor would provide the leadership in change. The first advisor trainees were chosen on the basis of the following criteria: They would be experienced teachers with many years of experience in the classroom; they would have a firm grounding in child development; they would have the ability to offer leadership to other teachers and to take a long range view of teacher's growth; they would be aware of, and sensitive to, the feelings of other people.

Trainees were selected after a series of intensive interviews with the director, interviews which made clear their philosophy of education, their understanding of the principles of developmental psychology, and their attitudes toward change. Important also was the fact that trainees were not directly connected with the administration or faculty of a school, and so would be able to function semi-autonomously in schools. This clear definition of status has a distinct advantage:

teachers do not view the advisor as part of the administration, and the administration does not view the advisor as part of the faculty. Thus the advisor can challenge the point of view of either administration or faculty without fearing political repercussions. She can question with some objectivity procedures and policies that might undermine development toward change. She can suggest alternatives that are feasible and consistent with steps towrad change.

The following procedures proved to be most useful in advisor training. Trainees worked side by side with Professor Weber in classrooms(and subsequently with advisors she had trained) or worked jointly with a senior advisor. Accompanying this practical implementation on school sites, trainees were given reading assignments related to child development, curriculum, and informal educational practices. Each week these readings were discussed in conference with the director. Efforts were made to familiarize trainees with the materials to be used in the classrooms and possibilities for curriculum extensions.

Trainees were asked to note: 1) *the quality of the teacher's interaction with children:* Was the teacher listening for the child's question? Was the teacher aware of evidence of a child's thinking? Was the teacher setting appropriate tasks for the children? Was the teacher openly valuing the children's efforts?
2) *The evidence of planning for individuals and small groups.* Was there evidence that the teacher was cueing into children's interests?
3) *The quality and quantity of accessible materials.* Were the materials unstructured enough to permit multi-level usage? Were there enough materials to support independent work? Was there enough of any one

material -- blocks for example -- to encourage sustained involvement, experimentation, problem solving?

4) *The children's responses to the teacher or materials.*

5) *The recognizable strengths of the teacher.*

The advisor's or trainee's work in the classroom was varied. It included: joining a child who was on the periphery of a group and engaging him; moving in to give input to a small group and calling the teacher's attention to possible extensions of their work; reading with a child; teaching handwriting to a child; beginning work with a group on a task assigned by the teacher. Note, however, that no demonstrations in over-all classroom practice were given, even though the director and the trainee were at many points more expert at conducting the program than the teacher. The objective was not to promote imitation of model teaching but to help the teacher discover her own style in implementation and to support her in it.

Another focal point of training lies in learning how to conduct a conference since the conference is a key aspect of the job of the advisor. The quality of the conference can determine whether there will be honest and forthright communication between the teacher and the advisor, or whether the relationship between teacher and advisor will be one of polite tolerance. One must be keenly aware of the subtle stresses and strains on the teacher who is revising her methods and techniques. Pressures--self-imposed and external--are exceedingly heavy on those teachers who have established a reputation as a good teacher. There is much self-doubt, comparisons are sometimes made in light of other teachers' progress, and there can be strong resistance to change even where the teacher has verbalized her interest and volunteered to change.

The advisor must be attuned enough to the teacher to guage what the thrust of the conference should be. Timing of suggestions and advice must be measured, keeping in mind two rules of thumb: (1) one cannot barrage a teacher with suggestions, advice, or constructive criticism; (2) *one must intervene on the level of the teacher's strengths.*

The advisor trainee learns that one or two goals are sufficient for a conference. She must take a global view of any classroom situation, sift through the positive occurrences, and put in order of priority what must be worked on now and what can wait. At all times, the advisor must work to support the teacher's morale.

The advisor's role is a demanding one. She must always present herself as a non-threatening entity to teachers. She must strive from the first day of contact with teachers to establish a bond of trust, the quality of which will enable teachers to reveal their uncertainties openly and honestly, acknowledge areas in which they lack confidence, and accept constructive criticism. The objective is to establish a cooperative tone in relationships -- sweeping the floor or stapling construction paper on a bulletin board, for example, may be consciously applied techniques to this end.

The advisor does not approach the teacher with predetermined goals or expectations; these are agreed upon jointly. She must hold to a long range view of teacher growth toward change and be prepared to defend a teacher's right to make strides at a pace that is tolerable and consistent with that teacher's individual capacities. As more and more of us need to realize, adults -- like children -- have different rates of learning. In fact, a common problem arises when principals

and parents are often disappointed by the apparent absence of visible progress on the part of the teacher.

On the questions of tenure, rating of teacher performance, retainment or suspension of teachers, the advisor must remain nonpartisan. She must endeavor to avoid all administrative involvements that would undermine her effectiveness in working with teachers. The advisor's first consideration and primary focus are to sustain an open relationship with the teachers with whom she works. As one teacher expressed it: "The advisor poses no threat to my survival in this school. She has no interest in rating me. She is merely interested in helping me provide a better learning environment for children."

As part of developing the advisor-teacher relationship, the advisor must help the teacher to arrive at a working definition of open classroom. Opening one's classroom implies that one has accepted the premise that children learn best in a rich and stimulating environment where there are opportunities for self-expression through language, art, and music; where attitudes of inquiry are promoted and sustained through appropriate experiences in science and math; where reading is viewed as a source of pleasure and information; where respect for persons is a guiding moral principle; and where the prime consideration is value of the uniqueness of the individual child, his interest, his level of functioning, and the contribution he can make as a group member. Realistically, no teacher can have such a classroom within a period of one year, or even two. The advisor helps the teacher understand this and directs the teacher's efforts toward setting reasonable expectations for herself.

However unique the character and obligations of her role, the advisor does not operate in a vacuum. The success of an advisory program is determined not by the advisor alone but by the quality of the teacher's input as well. To suggest that the teacher will be able to function competently without ongoing and continuous obligations and time commitments would be a misconception. For this reason, the method for selecting teachers to participate in an advisory relationship is to draw from those who *volunteer* to do so. This method is consciously structured to ensure a clear and firm commitment from the teacher interested. Expectations for teachers are: reading material that extends her understanding of child development and the rationale of Open Education; ful participation in Workshops and corridor staff meetings; and enrollment in courses in implementation. Almost always, workshops and courses in implementation will convene after school hours and frequently at locations away from school sites.

From the beginning, the participating teacher must view herself, not as a passive recipient of consultant services but as an active force with the responsibility of input and work obligations. The teacher must be ready to participate in her own learning process expanding her knowledge and skills.

If a teacher does not actively demonstrate an interest in study and training, serious doubts may be raised about her eligibility. She might be asked to reconsider her decision to open her classroom, or it might be suggested that she wait to participate until the beginning of the next year.

The advisor's functional operation in the open corridor setting encompasses the provision of ongoing and progressive training and support of inexperienced and experienced teachers. It is expected that training is needed as the new teacher attempts practical application of open methods.

In keeping with the philosophy of community within the open corridor concept, the principal is asked to place the teacher on a corridor where other teachers are employing open methods. The newcomer reaps the benefit of moral and material support from those around her, particularly since she is paired with an experienced teacher to whom she can turn for help when the advisor is not in school.

Before the opening of classes, the advisor schedules a block of time to confer with new teachers and assist them in planning, scheduling, and room arrangement. After school has gotten underway, the advisor allots blocks of time to working in new teachers' classrooms, making materials, and conferring with them about beginnings.

The advisor leads weekly meetings with inexperienced and experienced teachers in discussions of curriculum, organization, and children. As she listens to these discussions, or as she works in classrooms, she begins to identify areas in which the help of curriculum specialists would be useful. She calls upon the resources of other advisors or the City College Faculty. For example, in one school, a supervisor of student teachers, who is a math specialist, was asked to do a series of math workshops. The specialist was so heartened by the teachers' responses and receptivity that she continued to donate her time there for a full year.

For advisors, there seem to be two main appraoches to work in classrooms:

1. The teacher asks for help, but does not, at the time, wish to have the advisor's physical presence in her classroom. The advisor's response to this kind of request is to schedule a conference with the teacher.

2. The teacher invites the advisor to her classroom. The advisor's response is to observe and participate in the classroom. For example, she might do a detailed observation of a child, documenting his actions and interactions, to help the teacher plan for him.

One problem area for teachers is observing individual children. Teachers need help in seeing children and in listening to children. They must learn to observe so as to determine what the child is like physically: What is his energy level? Is he sick frequently? Can he see? Can he hear? How is his eye-hand coordination, his large and small muscle coordination? How is his posture? The teacher must observe the child as a worker: Does he finish a task? When engaged in a task, does he hurry to finish, or is he careful and patient? What is his attention span and what factors seem to influence it? Is he a wanderer? Does he approach materials in a haphazard way or is he organized and methodical? Is he easily frustrated?

The teacher must learn to observe the child as a thinker and learner. How well does he verbalize his thinking? How is his thinking made evident? How does he solve a problem? Is he persistent? When he encounters a problem with materials, does he seem to make connections or

does he flounder? Is he visually oriented? Is he aurally oriented? Can he differentiate between fantasy and reality? How is his long-term memory, his short-term memory? How does he approach reading? What are the patterns of his errors in reading? What are his interests? What does he talk about?

The teacher must have an idea of how the child seems to feel about himself. She must observe to discover the child's strengths.

Another problem for teachers is assessment, to which the key is recordkeeping. The teacher must observe the child in a number of different situations and note the child's responses. Piagetian tasks may be used to determine the child's intellectual level, as well as setting a task for a child informally.

Still another problem is planning for 30-35 children. The first step here is to get teachers to understand they are not running an individual tutorial program. They are encouraged to initiate group projects that include a math, science, social studies, or reading component, and to plan activities appropriate for the individual children who are engaged in the project. They are encouraged to do an informal reading diagnosis to determine, for example, which children need daily reading instruction, which children can be grouped for special work, which children need more language activities. The second step is to help teachers to understand that teaching in an open classroom does not mean that they should forfeit all whole group activities. A whole group lesson might be given in handwriting if such a need is dictated. A particular kind of material might be introduced to the whole group. Stories and discussions can be whole group activities.

The advisor's job then is to help the teacher set up her class-

room to encourage small group activities and to plan how the paraprofessional and student teacher will be utilized. A frequent suggestion is that she enlist the help of parent volunteers or borrow help from other classrooms when the need arises. For many teachers the prospect of letting go their whole class methods is overwhelming. Yet they find within a short period of time that a well-supplied and stimulating environment does engage the children, and as they begin to schedule individual and small group conferences in math or reading, their fear of not reaching the children dimishes appreciably.

The advisor maintains continuous communication with the principal and other interested administrators to share with them the progress and development of the Open Corridor and to enlist their help in program implementation. A weekly conference is scheduled with the principal or administrators. Since the administrators, too, have volunteered to include the program in their school, a genuine attitude and spirit of cooperation should very likely exist.

The advisor plays a pivotal role in the corridor community's relationship with parents. She is instrumental in identifying some of the resources parents have to offer, and in suggesting ways parents can be included in the classroom or corridor program. The advisor is often cast in the role of program interpreter to parents. Individual conferences are scheduled with parents who have particular concerns. Informal coffee hour discussions are held with small groups of parents, workshops are offered to parents,and meetings with the entire parent body of the corridor community are held periodically.

The role of the advisor, thus, is multi-facted. She, too, continues to find support for her work through weekly training sessions. In some of these sessions, specialists in linguistics, reading, research, math, psychology discuss their work; in others, advisors who have special skills offer workshops; and in still others, the director refocuses thinking on one or another facet of the program. These sessions add new dimensions to the advisor's thinking and learning which spin off with cyclical effects. The new information -- the different way of viewing -- is taken back to the schools and shared with the teachers at an opportune time.

As more teachers become interested in change, and new corridor communities are created, the advisor continues to be the core of the support system. For it is she who establishes that relationship of trust that allows the teacher to question the old, to question the new, and to select from both those methods, techniques, and procedures that will enable her students to sustain their curiosity about the world and to value and enjoy thinking and learning.